

Your phone rings. An email message lands in your in-box. A colleague from a program division appears at your desk, looking panicked. Someone from the news media has reached out to Region 7 to ask a question—maybe lots of questions—and you’ve been tasked to respond. What do you do?

STEP ONE: Gather as much information about the inquiry as possible.

- WHO is the inquirer?
- For which MEDIA OUTLET/ORGANIZATION does he/she work, and where is that located? (KABC-TV, Channel 6, Des Moines)
- WHAT is the inquirer’s phone number(s) and email address?
- WHAT are the questions? If it’s just one or two simple questions, it’s okay to make notes. If the inquirer has multiple and/or detailed questions, it’s usually best to request those be submitted to us in writing.
- Does the inquirer have a DEADLINE for us to respond to the request?
- It doesn’t hurt to repeat all of this information back to the inquirer, to verify accuracy.
- Assure the inquirer that someone will follow up in manner as timely as possible.

STEP TWO: Assess the inquiry and determine who is most qualified and appropriate to respond.

- The most appropriate person to respond may very well be you, but not always. This depends largely on the subject, nature and scope of the inquiry. Often, inquiries require press officers to research answers and seek information and advice from a range of EPA colleagues, one or more of whom may become your “go-to” Subject Matter Expert(s) for the inquiry.
- If you are in doubt as to which Subject Matter Expert(s) (SMEs) may have the answer(s), ask around. Do not hesitate to ask your OPA supervisor, and/or consult with the Division Director of the R7 program most closely involved with the issue(s) in question. They can help you identify the best SMEs and/or information sources.
- ALWAYS REMEMBER: NOT ALL QUESTIONS SHOULD BE ANSWERED BY EPA R7 OPA! EPA Region 7 frequently receives inquiries that need to be referred elsewhere—sometimes to our state environmental partners, our colleagues at EPA HQ or in other regions, to law enforcement, to other government agencies, or other external parties. We should not even attempt to answer questions beyond our jurisdiction, mission or expertise. *Stay in your lane!*
- State Partner Contacts
- Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), Kevin Baskins, kevin.baskins@dnr.iowa.gov , 515-725-8288
- Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE), Sara Belfry, sbelfry@kdheks.gov , 785-296-5795
- Missouri Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), Gena Terlizzi, gena.terlizzi@dnr.mo.gov , 573-751-1010
- Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality (NDEQ), Brian McManus, brian.mcmanus@nebraska.gov , 402-471-4233.
- Contact information for EPA HQ Office of Public Affairs and regional offices of public affairs: <http://www2.epa.gov/newsroom/media-contacts#hq>
- National issues often (but not always) have a designated HQ press person handling responses. If you refer a reporter to HQ, it’s good to give the HQ press officer a heads-up before you do so. Likewise for referring questions to our state partners.

- Occasionally, R7 OPA will receive calls asking about criminal environmental investigations (including the serving of search warrants) or prosecutions. These differ significantly from the civil administrative enforcement matters that are frequently the subjects of our R7 OPA enforcement press releases. Criminal enforcement matters typically involve the EPA Criminal Investigation Division, possibly other law enforcement agencies, one or more offices of the United States Attorneys (federal prosecutors) in our region, and sometimes personnel from the U.S. Department of Justice. Under no circumstances are we to comment on these matters. We should refer all such calls to the EPA-CID office here in our Regional Office. Mike Burnett, 913-551-7990, burnett.michael@epa.gov, is the local Supervisory Agent in Charge. It is helpful to our working relationship to provide Mike with a “heads-up” before we refer such calls to him.

STEP THREE: Assess the inquiry to determine if it involves particularly sensitive issues/aspects.

- Is this inquiry from a national media organization (NBC Nightly News, Wall Street Journal, Time Magazine, CNN, Washington Post, etc.)? At a minimum, you will need to notify EPA headquarters OPA of the inquiry. In some cases, someone at HQ—not you—may be in charge of responding on behalf of the agency, or both R7 and HQ may need to respond to separate aspects of the inquiry.
- Does the inquiry, even if not from a national media organization, involve an issue of national importance or significance? (Clean Power Plan, Clean Water Rule, agency budget, Presidential initiative, etc.)? If R7 OPA has not been provided with authorization by HQ and approved communication materials to use in responding to these inquiries, you may need to refer the inquirer to HQ.
- Does the inquiry relate to an enforcement matter, or a matter under litigation? Questions about enforcement actions, or those involving lawsuits brought against or by the Agency, at a minimum, should be brought to the attention of CNSL. The inquiry may need to be referred to EPA HQ and/or the U.S. Department of Justice, or someone in R7 may be able to respond—but you should not make this determination yourself, unless you have clear prior instructions. *Consult your local attorney!*
- Does the inquiry relate to a known “hot” or otherwise sensitive local issue (West Lake Landfill, Carter Carburetor Site, Kansas Tallgrass Prairie Burning, etc.)? Does it involve elected officials? At a minimum, inform your supervisor. You may also need to inform and/or consult with the RA/DRA, other Division Directors and other key personnel BEFORE you provide any response.
- Is the inquiry from a student journalist? HANDLE THESE WITH KID GLOVES! Students may be overly or unnecessarily aggressive, disorganized or unfocused with what they ask of you. It is almost always best to request they submit their questions in writing, and similarly, for us to respond in writing.

STEP FOUR: Gather information and develop the message.

- Contact your SME(s) and access other resources (web info, hard files, reference works, etc.) to get the information that will enable you to respond to the inquiry.
- Explain the subject, nature and scope of the inquiry to your SME(s). Be sure to emphasize if there is a deadline associated with EPA’s response.
- Depending on the subject, nature and scope of the inquiry, you may need to gather information from more than one SME, in which case you may also need to vet your proposed response(s) to multiple staff and supervisors. This can take time, legwork, mule-like persistence, and diplomacy!
- Some inquiries can be easily handled by you providing simple, basic, undisputed facts to the

inquirer—such as those that can be pulled from various EPA resources on the web, or from R7 files and resources.

- Some inquiries are more complex—such as those that may involve multiple questions, lists of questions, highly technical information, requests for large amounts of data or documents, and/or the expertise of one or more SMEs. These may require you, working with OPA and division managers, to identify one or more (but preferably not more than two or three) SMEs to prepare for interviews, either by telephone or in person.
- Requests to interview the Regional Administrator will require the preparation of an appropriate briefing packet for the RA in advance of any interview occurring. The packet must include a range of information about the inquirer, what is being sought, and our messages/talking points.
- Requests to interview other R7 personnel (anyone besides the RA) should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

STEP FIVE: Deliver the information in a timely manner.

- Follow through on the inquiry, providing the appropriate and agreed-to response. In many cases, this can be done via email, which also provides an incontrovertible, indisputable written record of the information that EPA provides.
- Someone from OPA should always be present when the Regional Administrator conducts interviews, to assist in collecting follow-up questions or responding to other needs. With certain exceptions, someone from OPA should also be present when other R7 personnel provide interviews to the press.
- For all responses, be mindful of the inquirer's deadline. It can be a significant waste of your time, and of your colleagues' time, to gather information, formulate responses and provide interviews if you cannot deliver these goods in advance of the inquirer's deadline. Few things aggravate journalists more than this, and the resulting damage to the agency's reputation as a timely and accurate news source can be significant—and tremendously difficult to repair.
- If it becomes apparent that you will not be able to meet the inquirer's deadline, you should strive to let him or her know this as soon as possible, and request additional time to follow-up.

STEP SIX: Document and follow-up.

- Enter all media inquiries PROMPTLY in Daily Digest. (Follow examples in the Daily Digest template for format and style.)
- If you are providing a desk statement as part of a response, be sure to store a copy of that desk statement on the H: drive for future reference and consistency of messaging. (See protocols for naming and storing press products.)
- Throughout this process, if you are filling in for an absent press officer, be sure to copy him or her on ALL email communications with the inquirer, as well as those to internal parties and external partners. This provides continuity and consistency of our responses and messaging.
- If you are able to “close out” a response, congratulations! If not, communicate clearly to your colleagues what work remains to be done, and preserve your notes and other information. It's also a good idea to keep program managers and staff “in the loop” if another OPA staff member will be picking up where you left off.